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Lake Okeechobee Protection Program Surges Ahead

Project partners committed to cleanup effort

*T*he environmental problems facing Lake Okeechobee are so large that the effort to fix them will require participation from everyone with a stake in this vital ecosystem's future.

So goes the thinking behind the Lake Okeechobee Protection Plan (LOPP), a multifaceted strategy aimed at reducing phosphorus entering this essential water source for South Florida. The plan was presented to Governor Jeb Bush in January, as required when the Florida Legislature set this massive environmental restoration effort into motion in 2000 by enacting the Lake Okeechobee Protection Act.

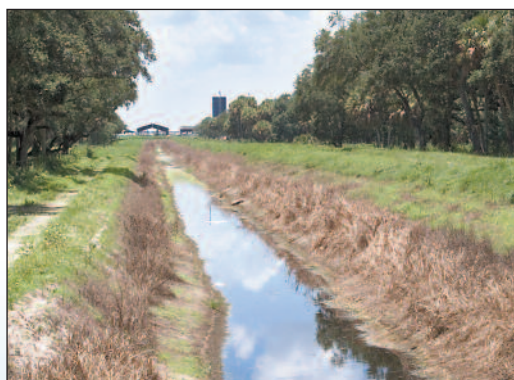
The primary goal is to reduce the amount of phosphorus entering the lake from the 10-year average of 433 metric tons per year to 140 metric tons per year by 2015. While phosphorus is vital to all natural systems, excess amounts promote algae and undesirable plant growth, changing the lake's delicate ecology.

From common-sense practices to public-private partnerships and leading edge technologies, this far-reaching plan's success depends on the commitment of the region's urban newcomers and long-time town folk, ranchers and dairy farmers,

and its government and community leaders.

INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

Butler Oaks Dairy in Highlands County has established an elaborate water system of canals, culverts and storage areas to reuse excessive rainfall and chemically treat phosphorus-laden water on the property. In Ousley Estates, just north of the lake and south of Okeechobee City, old failing septic tanks are giving way to a state-of-the-art vacuum pump sewer system that sends wastewater to a central wastewater treatment plant.



Small canals like this one and others that surround the lowland southern end of Butler Oaks Dairy Farm were built to divert phosphorus-laden stormwater runoff to a deep holding pool on the property. Water that once went directly into the Kissimmee River is now treated before it reaches the river.

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